



# **“Teaching Online Made Me a Better Teacher”: Studying the Impact of Virtual Course Experiences on Teachers’ Face-to-Face Practice**

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## **Abstract**

*Anecdotal accounts from teachers have long suggested the possibility that virtual teaching experiences have a positive impact on face-to-face teaching practices, a so-called “reverse impact” phenomenon. Survey and focus group data collected as part of a statewide evaluation of a virtual school offered an opportunity to explore this impact. Findings from a study of teacher perceptions indicate that three quarters of teachers who teach in both virtual and traditional environments felt that virtual experiences improved their practice in face-to-face classrooms. The authors discuss three types of impact reflected in teacher comments and discuss tentative implications for teacher preparation programs and for bolstering the rationale for using technology in education. (Keywords: distance education, online learning, virtual schools)*

## **Benefits of Virtual Schooling: Current and Proposed**

The popularity of virtual schooling, “instruction in which (K–12) students and teachers are separated by time and/or location and interact via computers and/or telecommunications technologies” (National Forum on Education Statistics, 2006, p.1), continues to be a success story unique in the evolution of educational technology. Although adoption of technologies in K–12 school classrooms has traditionally been slow and sporadic (Cuban, Kilpatrick, & Peck, 2001; Norris, Sullivan, & Poirot, 2003) and benefits have often been difficult to document, virtual schooling has seen steady acceptance and growth since its beginning in 1997, and the resulting impact on U.S. education can easily be described as transformational.

As of September 2007, 42 states sponsored “significant supplemental online learning programs, significant full-time programs, or both” (Watson & Ryan, 2007, p. 18). Other states are in the planning stages for their own virtual school offerings. The latest National Center for Education Statistics report on virtual schools (Zandberg & Lewis, 2008) found that in 2004–2005, there were an estimated 506,950 technology-based distance education course enrollments in public school districts.

Benefits both documented and perceived have fed the growth of virtual schooling. The virtual schooling movement was founded on the egalitarian principle of providing access to educational opportunities not locally available, and indeed recent virtual school evaluations confirm greatly increased access for these and other populations (Florida TaxWatch, 2007; Roblyer, Freeman, Mason, & Schneidmiller, 2007; Watson & Ryan, 2007). Other documented benefits include passing rates of 5–19% higher than traditional programs on key outcome tests such as Advanced Placement (AP) exams (Smith, Clark, & Blomeyer, 2005, p.15) and higher achieved grades in comparison to traditional course delivery for some content areas

(Florida TaxWatch, 2007). Recent economic pressures have given new import to the benefits of convenience and savings in travel costs that virtual schools offer. And recent accounts from virtual teachers offer the possibility of yet another kind of benefit that was the focus of the study reported here: a so-called “reverse impact” phenomenon in which virtual school teaching enhances face-to-face (FTF) classroom practices.

## **Background and Study Rationale**

The unique potential of online environments to benefit teaching and learning has been the subject of much discussion in distance learning literature (Benson, 2003; Gallini & Barron, 2001–2002; Tallent-Runnels, et al., 2006). For example, Tallent-Runnels et al. reviewed findings suggesting that “in asynchronous discussions, students had more time to think about their discussions . . . (which) improved the depth and quality of responses” (p. 96), and that the “online environment may offer a unique social advantage as compared to the traditional classroom” (p. 97). Gallini & Barron (2001–2002) found that nearly all of the 153 online students they surveyed reported increased communication with instructors (88%) and other students (97%) compared to their traditional course experiences.

Rice (2006) found that online teaching strategies make best use of the unique potential of the online environment when they are highly interactive and based on a constructivist model that encourages students to be active, independent learners. In a meta-analysis comparing achievement, attitudes, and retention between FTF and distance courses, Bernard et al. (2004) found that active learning (problem-based formats with collaboration among students) fostered better achievement and attitudes, though only in asynchronous (e.g., Web-based) formats.

Treacy (2007) described several key differences between FTF and online teaching that helped inform training of online high school teachers who were to teach in virtual school programs. She observed that it was useful to point out to teachers that realizing the benefits of online teaching formats meant they must modify all of the following:

- How curriculum is organized and delivered. This includes methods for presenting content and providing clear expectations for student participation, products, and pacing so students can work on their own
- Social dynamics. They must learn to write discussion prompts and create effective ways of facilitating online discussions and supporting student engagement.
- Assessment strategies. Online formats allow many ways to demonstrate learning, including reflective participation in the online discussion and formative feedback from the instructor.

Transfer of practices learned in virtual environments to traditional classrooms have been reported anecdotally for some time. An early